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United Mission in Mesopotamia



Our Mission in IRAQ Task

The Land of Ancient Civilizations



Entrance to the American School for Girls, Baghdad

Our Mission Task in Iraq

More than sixty years ago the Church Missionary Society of Great Britain sent missionaries to Mesopotamia, the Iraq of today. By the early part of this century, they had successfully established their mission in Baghdad. Necessary retrenchment after World War I, however, forced them to withdraw.

It was unthinkable that this country, so rich in Bible tradition and so strategic in its importance, should be left without effective Christian witness. Ninety-three per cent of its population of nearly 5 million are Moslems. Baghdad, the capital, is one of the great centers of hoary Mohammedan traditions. So challenging a task was too great for any one church, and the mission boards of the whole family of Presbyterian and Reformed Churches were urged to form a joint mission. Three responded, and since April 1924 the Presbyterian Church in the U. S. A., the Evangelical and Reformed Church and the Reformed Church in America have been maintaining the "United Mission in Mesopotamia." A united effort is an imperative responsibility for a difficult task.

Biblical Heritage

Iraq, the "blessed land" of the Old Testament, is the reputed site of the garden of Eden, and it was the home of Abraham. As a result of modern archaeological research, one can walk today upon the great pavements which Abraham used in his native city of Ur. Sections of the great double wall which once surrounded the city of Babylon can



Today's Mosul on the banks of the Tigris, opposite site of Ancient Nineveh. On feast days Moslems make pilgrimages to its shrines.

still be seen at modern Hillah, one of our stations. Inside these double walls was probably located the den of lions into which Daniel was thrown. A series of broken arches marks the banquet hall of Nebuchadnezzar where, according to the book of Daniel, Belshazzar saw the fatal handwriting on the wall.

Natives of this land were among those who, on the day of Pentecost, heard the apostles speaking in their own tongue "the mighty works of God." They, too, were "pricked in their hearts" as they heard the impassioned plea of Peter. Who will follow in his train to tell them the story of Jesus today?

Iraq, a New Name for an Old Land

Iraq is often referred to as the "Cradle of Civilization." It is about twice as large as the state of Iowa and lies between the desert tablelands of Syria, the highlands of Iran,

the sands of Arabia and the slowly receding Persian Gulf. Through the length of the land flow the life-giving rivers of Biblical fame—the Tigris and Euphrates.

The history of Iraq begins 5,000 years before the Christian era. Two thousand years before Christ, Babylon had become the leading city of the land. Southern Iraq later came to be part of Babylonia. At the same time, what is now northern Iraq was ruled by a city known as Asshur and was called Assyria. After Alexander the Great conquered Babylonia the city was burned, abandoned, neglected and gradually turned into a huge mound of desolated ruins. Finally, in the seventh century A. D., the Arabs, all aflame with their new Islamic faith came to take possession of the land. During this period, Baghdad was chosen as the new capital, a position it still holds. During the eighth and ninth centuries Baghdad, the city of "a thousand and one nights," was considered the center of world civilization.

So, in ancient Iraq, three of the greatest empires rose and disappeared: the Chaldean on the banks of the Tigris, the Babylonian on the Euphrates, and the Assyrian in the north. The ruins of the ancient cities of Iraq, which now are only mounds of earth and ruins of brick and clay, are all that is left of what once were centers of great civilizations.

Picturesque Baghdad on the Tigris



Modern Developments

Iraq was admitted to the General Assembly of the League of Nations as an independent nation in 1932. Today new life is stirring in that ancient land. Christian leaders, politicians and archaeologists are turning their attention again to Iraq. Leaders of the people are reviving their land, increasing its productivity and removing illiteracy. Hope runs high that Iraq will once again become a fertile land, the rich granary it once was. But more than anything else the rich resources in oil have drawn the eyes of the world to Iraq and the whole Middle East.

In spite of natural resources, however, the greater portion of the population lives in bleak poverty. Most of them are landless and live in hovels or wander about in this drab and dusty land unaware of the great lakes of "black gold" in the terrestrial coffers under their feet. Approximately 3,600,000 of the people are Arabs, 720,000 Kurds and 180,000 Persians, all of whom are Moslems. There are also 120,000 Jews and 140,000 Christians, most of whom belong to the eastern churches, the Nestorian, Armenian, and Maronite confessions. They maintain their old traditions, but there is no missionary outreach toward the Moslems among whom they dwell.



*An Arab's home
in the desert*



Bedouin, camel and oil refinery meet in Iraq

Standard Oil Co.

The United Work

In order to bring the Christian message to the people, the cities of Baghdad, Kirkuk, Hillah and Mosul have been the main outposts for our united evangelistic advance. Quietly and without glamor our missionaries, together with native evangelists and colporteurs, travel from place to place presenting the Gospel. This is done not only in the streets or at inns where people, weary from travel, have stopped to rest or to hear the latest news, but also in the homes of Christians who have invited inquiring friends to hear the living Word. A "Gospel Jeep" has proven itself to be a very important piece of equipment. Loaded with Christian literature, portions of Scripture, Bibles and medical supplies, it has enabled our missionaries to do more effective evangelistic work.



*Missionary Glessner and his
Gospel Station Wagon*



*Rev. B. D. Hakken and convert who
alone distributed over 7500 pieces of
literature in one year.*

Another avenue of approach is the school. Today only one boy in seven and one girl in twenty receives even a primary education. Our Girls' School at Baghdad, therefore, meets a great need in Iraq, and at the same time provides a channel for Christian instruction and character building. Here, about 150 girls are enrolled who come from the homes of Moslems, Jews and Christians. Cross currents of hatred among these communities disturb the Iraq society, but here these young people learn tolerance and mutual understanding under the inspiration of the gospel of reconciliation.



Primary Department, Girls' School, Baghdad

The Challenge Today

It is an overwhelming challenge to the whole Christian church when men and women in a Bible-land have failed to hear or heed the Gospel of Jesus Christ. They must be told.

During the war years our missionary force was reduced



*Converts and
Rev B. D.
Hakken in
Baghdad*

to a mere handful. Now reinforcements are being recruited and new approaches are planned. There is especially urgent need to secure doctors and nurses to man a well established hospital. The Arabian Mission of the Reformed Church in America has offered to transfer its hospital at Amara to the United Mission in Mesopotamia if the Joint Committee will provide at least part of the staff.

Iraq, in the very midst of the seething, fermenting Middle East, where nations of the World are clamoring for the right to obtain oil which provides power for the industries of the world as well as the sinews for possible future wars, desperately needs Christ. While they are changing their economic ways, their spiritual ways of life must also be changed. Nor will our missionaries in Iraq rest content until the few Moslems who have had the courage to profess their faith in Christ increase in numbers until a strong evangelical church is found. It will take faith, courage and perseverance to lead them into the Christian way of life and the brotherhood of Christ, the Prince of Peace. This is the challenge of Iraq today.



Miss Afife Jabir, a teacher in the American School for Girls, Baghdad.



The Glessner family, with the exception of Phyllis, who is in college in America.

The United Mission in Mesopotamia

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